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MENTAL INSTABILITY AS A FACTOR IN PROGRESS

OF the recent developments which have contributed in a marked degree to revise and enlarge our ideas of human progress, that of psycho-analysis probably stands pre-eminent. Concerned in its beginnings mainly with the study and treatment of mental disease it is no longer confined to pathology but has extended its boundaries into the fields of education, sociology, philosophy and art. The movement, moreover, is as yet but in its infancy and we may with confidence predict that its growth will furnish us with still further vistas of human possibilities. At the moment, however, psycho-analysis would appear to be suffering the fate of all new developments: namely, the effects of an easy popularization, with the inevitable concomitants of dogmatism, fanaticism, shallow thought, sentimentality and dilettantism. This tendency is apparent not only in the narrower field concerned with pathology but also in the wider field concerned with education in its broader sense. In this paper I propose to discuss and criticize certain current ideas regarding what psychoanalysts term sublimation, by which is meant the directing of primitive, and largely anti-social tendencies into channels of a worthier kind.

The term "sublimation" is rapidly becoming clothed with sacred and religious meanings and we may soon expect it to be proclaimed as a new evangel replacing the

older schemes of salvation. Under the plea of avoiding or resolving conflicts, of harmonizing the various passions and tendencies in human nature and of adjusting these to the social customs and environment, psycho-analysts and their followers may become as solicitous about the welfare of the individual soul as are the salvationists. A healthy attitude of scepticism is justified in dealing with these schemes of so-called harmonization for it is quite possible that what may pass under the name of sublimation may become a mode of repression. Sublimation in its widest sense is no mere affair of the drawing-room or the academy: it is growth and life itself. What we are concerned with is not a superficial culture but rather the deeper forces moving in human nature. "Shall a man lose himself in countless masses of adjustments?" asks Whitman, "and be so shaped with reference to this, that, and the other, that the simply good and healthy and brave parts of him are reduced and clipped away like the bordering of box in a garden? You can cultivate corn and roses and orchards—but who shall cultivate the mountain peaks, the ocean and the tumbling gorgeousness of the clouds?" Professor McDougall in his *Social Psychology* envisages an ideal individual who—having attained character in the fullest sense and a completely generalized will, is raised above moral conflict and exhibits to the world that finest flower of moral growth—serenity. "His struggles are no longer moral conflicts but are intellectual efforts to discover what is most worth while, what is most right for him to do."

The criticism to be urged against this ideal is two-fold: first, it does not take sufficiently into account the recent psychology of the unconscious which shows forces at work of a strange and often disruptive order: secondly, the ideal appears to stand for a static, rather than for a dynamic, view of human personality, in that it envisages a more or less mechanical application of a completed character rather

than the expansion of the personality itself. Contrast the above statement of McDougall's with the affirmation of Nietzsche—"Yea, a thing unbearable is within me, a thing that blasteth rocks. . . . It is called my Will. . . . And this secret did Life itself utter unto me. 'Behold,' it said, 'I am whatsoever *must* surpass itself.'"

A somewhat similar line of criticism may be urged against the Freudians. In this case, we find the tendency to take the average type of human being as the normal: which type becomes a standard of reference, all variations from it being regarded as abnormal as soon as they show signs of neurosis. The main cause of the neurosis having been traced to the activity of some submerged "complex," the treatment consists in bringing this to the surface and thus restoring the patient to a "normal" condition, when the work of the psycho-analyst is supposed to be finished. The deeper and all-important problem is left untouched; namely, as to whether the so-called normal is desirable: in short, as to whether it is not the undesirable environment conditioning the neurosis that needs the surgeon's knife. This is not to suggest that primitive passions and tendencies should be allowed free-play: for that would involve the dissolution of society. Controlling forces embodied in social organization are indispensable for progress and the problem confronting us is concerned with the nature of these controlling forces and the manner in which they are to be applied. Childhood, for example is a period of continual conflict between primitive tendencies and the customs and ideals of society, and according to the direction given to the energy engendered depends the future character and life of the individual.

In the light of the foregoing consideration it is refreshing and stimulating to find a point of view being put forward which is at once a challenge to popular ideas on the subject and an indication of a line of advance full of im-

mense possibilities. I refer to a recent work by Dr. W. H. R. Rivers: *Instinct and the Unconscious*. The main purpose of this book is to suggest a biological view of psychoneurosis by linking together the two conceptions indicated in its title. For the purpose of this paper, however, I am concerned only with a single chapter in the book, that on Sublimation in which Dr. Rivers raises the whole question of the significance of conflict in relation to human progress. It is quite possible, the author points out, that by the processes of suppression and sublimation a person may become completely adapted to his environment and thereby attain a highly peaceful and stable existence. But is such an existence conducive to *exceptional* accomplishment, i. e., to sustained creative effort in the fields of science, art, literature or of action? Dr. Rivers is inclined to think not, and suggests that all great achievement necessitates a certain degree of *instability* in the unconscious and subconscious strata of the mind which form the scene of the conflict between instinctive tendencies and the forces by which they are controlled.

A study of the lives of many geniuses certainly tends to substantiate the above view: and the close connection between genius and insanity opens up the wider question of the relation between pathology and art. Are pathological conditions the cause of artistic activity or vice versa, or are both but the concomitants of still deeper causes? Nietzsche, by virtue of his own bitter experience, was fully aware of the close connection between disease and art. "It is the exceptional conditions," he writes in *The Will to Power*, "that make one an artist; all those states which are related to, and profoundly interwoven with, pathological phenomena; so that it appears impossible to be an artist without being diseased." In a series of illuminating articles recently contributed to the *New Age*, Mr. Janko Lavrin asserts that Nietzsche owes his penetrating analysis,

his biting satire, his ecstatic Hymns to Life, largely to the grave disease from which he suffered and which led him to progressive paralysis and madness. He suggests that physical disease by stirring up some of those mental currents which normally remain unconscious, may produce the intellectual sensitiveness characteristic of genius. Nevertheless, I hold that there need be no final or inevitable connection between disease and art; and that Nietzsche's assumption that his art depended on his disease may be regarded as a rationalization on the part of the sufferer. Otherwise the problem of producing exceptional men would resolve itself into one of producing the most suitable forms of disease. This question of arousing and directing the unconscious powers in man is no new one and it is more than probable that many, if not all, of the ancient systems of Yoga current in the East, were means to this end. But the whole problem has received a totally new orientation as a result of Western social development, which opens up new possibilities for the individual through a modification of the total environment in his favor. It is certain that up to the present we have barely touched the fringe of these possibilities, but there are indications already of what might be accomplished.

The stupendous advances in science and in industry involved in, and following, the Industrial Revolution have resulted in a dominance over material factors, and made possible the linking up and organization of the whole world. The rise and growth of the modern democratic states have provided new opportunities for self-government among the peoples concerned; and the facilities of education, literature, science and art have been opened up to the individual on an altogether unprecedented scale. The whole of this modern movement might fitly be called the Democratic movement, using the term in its widest sense to include not government merely, but in Whitman's phrase,

“the ploughing up in earnest of the interminable average fallows of humanity.” On the other hand, the growing recognition of all these possibilities is giving rise to increasing criticism, directed against the shortcomings of the existing social and economic system. It is urged that the enormously enhanced powers of production are being used not to lighten the burden of man’s labor but to enhance the power of the few: that industry has become centralized, with the result that all power is concentrated at the apex of a pyramid, the base of which holds masses of workers as mere bound supporters of the whole system. In the sphere of politics self-government is seen often to be an illusion: control over policy residing ultimately with small financial or governmental groups. With regard to education it is pointed out that the large classes in working-class schools fail to provide children with the individual attention they require, while the higher facilities are still only open to those with sufficient money. Again, the forcing of boys and girls into industry at a critical age and irrespective of their natural aptitudes, results in warped natures, misfits, discontent, with all the consequent loss of energy and talent. Finally in our domestic and social life the free growth and expression of the individual is hampered and distorted by the existence of a network of customs, traditions and taboos out of which escape is well-nigh impossible.

The existence of these grounds for complaint results in the production of a wide-spread dissatisfaction with things as they are, which—where it escapes from sinking into apathy—finds expression on the one hand in movements of reform, or on the other along channels of violence or vice. Thus in dealing with social affairs we are confronted with the same problem that we met with in the case of the individual, namely, the relation between conflict and development; and we are led to enquire as to how far the existing conflicts are justified and desirable. Leaving

on one side those extremists who would encourage and intensify conflicts of all kinds, and also those at the other extreme who seek to abolish all conflicts, we may say that existing conditions set up conflicts between society and the individual, and between different societies, of an altogether undesirable kind. If, as seems probable, the direction taken by the energy engendered in conflict is partly determined by the nature of the conflict, then many of the causes at present operating to produce conflict stand condemned by their results. This is obvious in the case of international strife and warfare; but it is equally evident in our ordinary life. The causes that compel casual laborers to struggle like wolves at the docks each morning for the chance of a job, or that condemn millions of workers to a grim fight with poverty and sickness amid hideous and nauseating surroundings, cannot be justified in view of the immense resources of modern production. Of what use to talk of sublimation to a miner living with his family in a miserable hovel yet with artistic yearnings and possibilities in his soul? It may be noted in passing, however, that much of the social and religious activity of the present day, whatever other function it may perform, affords a mechanism for that easy harmonization against which I have protested above. This point is admirably illustrated by the following deliciously frank statement in a recent number of the *British Journal of Industrial Welfare*, "In others it is the religious attitude towards life that makes the situation tolerable. The lack of satisfaction seems unimportant and the discouragements of this life seem trivial in the light of the fuller life that is promised by religion which reconciles the worker to social inequalities and enables him, under hard economic and social conditions, to continue cheerfully productive."

It is at this point that it becomes possible to formulate our exact charge against existing social conditions. This

charge is not that the latter generate conflicts but rather that they do so in a senseless, brutal and unnecessary fashion. The case against the existing order is, briefly, that by imposing limitations of an arbitrary and chance character upon the individual it prevents the latter from coming up against his own *natural* limitations or those of a healthy and rational social environment. And the tragedy is that so large a number are ignorant of the fact that they are limited in this way; the average man, in short, does not realize the tremendous potentialities dormant within him; his energies are either taken up in the getting of bread and butter or with the trivialities of life. When men do awaken to the situation the chances are that, after a struggle against conventions, they end either by accommodating themselves to the existing order, or by becoming neurotic. Regarding all healthy creative effort as resulting from a balance between unconscious forces and the forces by which they are controlled, there is a loss of energy in either case, since one of the factors becomes dominant *at the expense of the other*; whereas *what is required is that the two factors should meet in such a way that they issue forth in some form of creative activity*; just as the upper and nether millstones meet in grinding corn or as the two carbons of an arc-lamp first meet and then spring equally apart to produce the light.

It is in connection with this aspect of the question that I want to refer to another fascinating suggestion put forward by Dr. Rivers. This suggestion is concerned with the origin of the energy which is engendered in the conflicts "made necessary by the highly complex character of the past history of our race." "There are two chief possibilities," continues Dr. Rivers, "one, that it is derived from the instinctive tendencies which through the action of the controlling forces fail to find their normal outlet; the other, that the *energy so arising is increased in amount*

through the conflict between controlled and controlling forces." It is this second alternative that Dr. Rivers is inclined to accept, and many facts and analogies might be cited in support of it. The effect of climate on body and mind is a case in point, and it has been proved that the production of bodily heat in winter increases by as much as 150 per cent. Similarly in human affairs opposition, by arousing a greater force of antagonism to overcome it, carries many a movement much farther than would otherwise be the case. Again Nietzsche could not have felt the blasting force of his "Will" apart from the limitations imposed by his own nature and by his social environment. But I would suggest that before an *increase* of energy can come into being, certain important conditions must be fulfilled, chief among which is that the energy engendered by conflict shall find some form of expression. Just as a flame is produced by the fusion of two gases which in the act of combining develop so much heat that their products become incandescent, so the flame of genius only arises as a result of the welding of opposing elements into some adequate form of expression. In each case we have the same cycle of contact, conflict, and fusion, with the consequent increment of energy issuing in a synthetic function. According to this view the increase of energy noted by Dr. Rivers comes in the shape of an "unearned increment" arising from the association of the factors concerned. The great achievements in life therefore are those in which conflict has issued in conquest, just as suffering is only raised to the level of tragedy by becoming aware of its own poignant depth and meaning.

To summarize the conclusion of this essay, psychoanalysis has revealed the immense part played by the unconscious factors in man's nature and we have reason to believe that these forces are stimulated by conflict with other opposing forces; and further, that the outcome of

the conflict, whether for good or evil, depends partly upon the nature of the conflict itself and partly on the direction given to it by the individual or by his environment—using the latter term in its widest sense. We have seen that the conflicts forced upon the majority under existing social arrangements result in a colossal waste of energy and talent, and that these arrangements must be modified in favor of the individual. But if conditions are made more favorable for the development of exceptional persons, these latter can only arise by virtue of transferring the struggle with society to a struggle with their own limitations and those of nature. “He who cannot command himself shall obey,” said Nietzsche, or in the words of Franz Hartmann, “He who cannot evolve a world within his own soul needs the external world to evolve his soul.” Moral codes and sanctions may be necessary for the large majority, but the higher virtues can only be attained by self-discipline going hand-in-hand with self-knowledge. Finally, we have arrived at the conclusion that mental instability may, or may not be, a factor making for human progress, according to the nature of its outcome. In itself it is an *indication of power*, but whether that promise shall be realized depends on whether it is able to find some outlet in creative activity. In the case of the genius the elements are fused or *integrated* and the energy directed into some positive and specific function. In the case of the confirmed victim of psycho-neurosis there is *disintegration*, resulting in loss of potential power and causing any available energy to be driven into subterranean channels or into distorted forms of expression. Between these two extreme types there are of course infinite gradations and also the ever-present possibility of a rapid alternation from one to the other. Hence, there is no room for instability as a cult since it can wreck as well as build. In fact, we may liken it to the katabolic forces at work within the body, whereby in the

breaking down of the tissues heat and motion are generated. These processes, however, must be counter-balanced by others of the anabolic order, whereby worn-out tissues are renewed. Both processes are necessary—representing flux and constancy, instability and stability—and are included in the metabolism by which the life and health of the body are maintained.

This view corresponds with that expressed in a passage in George Santayana's *Life of Reason* which I cannot resist quoting at length. "A barbarous mind," he writes, "cannot conceive life like health, as a harmony continually preserved or restored and containing those natural and ideal activities which disease merely interrupts. . . . Its deification of unreason, instability and strife comes partly from piety and partly from inexperience. There is piety in saluting nature in her perpetual flux, and in thinking that since no equilibrium is maintained for ever, none, perhaps deserves to be. There is inexperience in not considering that wherever interests and judgments exist, the natural flux *has fallen, so to speak, into a vortex*, and created a natural good, a cumulative life and an ideal purpose. . . . To adjust all demands to one ideal and adjust that ideal to its natural conditions—in other words, to live the Life of Reason—is something perfectly possible; for those demands, being akin to one another in spite of themselves, can be better fulfilled by *co-operation than by blind conflict*, while the ideal, far from demanding any profound revolution in nature merely expresses her actual tendency and forecasts what her perfect functioning would be."

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